

# In the United States Court of Federal Claims

## OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS

Filed: January 30, 2024

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AUTUMN DECKER,	*	No. 15-017V
	*	Special Master Sanders
Petitioner,	*	
	*	UNPUBLISHED
v.	*	
	*	
SECRETARY OF HEALTH	*	Attorneys' Fees and Costs
AND HUMAN SERVICES,	*	
	*	
Respondent.	*	
* * * * *		

*Andrew D. Downing*, Downing, Allison & Jorgenson, Phoenix, AZ, for Petitioner;  
*Lara A. Englund*, United States Dep't of Justice, Washington, DC, for Respondent.

### **DECISION AWARDING ATTORNEYS' FEES AND COSTS<sup>1</sup>**

On January 7, 2015, Candie Decker, mother of Autumn Decker ("Petitioner"), filed a petition for compensation pursuant to the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program.<sup>2</sup> 42 U.S.C. §300aa-10 et seq. (2012). On October 25, 2017, Petitioner reached the age of majority, and the caption was appropriately amended. (ECF No. 79). Petitioner alleged that the Hepatitis A vaccination she received on July 16, 2013, caused her to suffer from Hashimoto's thyroiditis and premature ovarian failure. Pet. at 1 (ECF No. 1). On August 28, 2023, the parties filed a proffer,

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<sup>1</sup> The undersigned intends to post this Ruling on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website. **This means the Ruling will be available to anyone with access to the Internet.** In accordance with Vaccine Rule 18(b), petitioner has 14 days to identify and move to redact medical or other information, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. If, upon review, the undersigned agrees that the identified material fits within this definition, the undersigned will redact such material from public access. Because this unpublished ruling contains a reasoned explanation for the action in this case, the undersigned is required to post it on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002. 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2012) (Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services).

<sup>2</sup> National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, Pub L. No. 99-660, 100 Stat. 3755. Hereinafter, for ease of citation, all "§" references to the Vaccine Act will be to the pertinent subparagraph of 42 U.S.C. § 300aa (2012).

which the undersigned adopted as her decision awarding compensation on August 31, 2023. (ECF No. 173).

On July 11, 2023, Petitioner filed a motion for attorneys' fees and costs. ("Fees App.") (ECF No. 167). Petitioner requests total attorneys' fees and costs in the amount of \$43,373.67, representing \$38,854.50 in attorneys' fees and \$4,519.17 in attorneys' costs. Fees App. at 1. Pursuant to General Order No. 9, Petitioner has indicated that she has not personally incurred any costs in pursuit of her claim. *Id.* at 2. Respondent responded to the motion on July 19, 2023, stating that Respondent "is satisfied that the statutory requirements for an award of attorneys' fees and costs are met in this case." Resp't's Resp. at 2-3 (ECF No. 168). Petitioner did not file a reply thereafter.

This matter is now ripe for consideration.

### **I. Reasonable Attorneys' Fees and Costs**

The Vaccine Act permits an award of "reasonable attorneys' fees" and "other costs." § 15(e)(1). If a petitioner succeeds on the merits of his or her claim, the award of attorneys' fees is automatic. *Id.*; see *Sebelius v. Cloer*, 133 S. Ct. 1886, 1891 (2013). However, a petitioner need not prevail on entitlement to receive a fee award as long as the petition was brought in "good faith" and there was a "reasonable basis" for the claim to proceed. § 15(e)(1). Here, because petitioner was awarded compensation pursuant to a proffer, she is entitled to a final award of reasonable attorneys' fees and costs.

The Federal Circuit has approved the lodestar approach to determine reasonable attorneys' fees and costs under the Vaccine Act. *Avera v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 515 F.3d 1343, 1348 (Fed. Cir. 2008). This is a two-step process. *Id.* First, a court determines an "initial estimate . . . by 'multiplying the number of hours reasonably expended on the litigation times a reasonable hourly rate.'" *Id.* at 1347–48 (quoting *Blum v. Stenson*, 465 U.S. 886, 888 (1984)). Second, the court may make an upward or downward departure from the initial calculation of the fee award based on specific findings. *Id.* at 1348.

It is "well within the special master's discretion" to determine the reasonableness of fees. *Saxton v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1521–22 (Fed. Cir. 1993); see also *Hines v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 22 Cl. Ct. 750, 753 (1991). ("[T]he reviewing court must grant the special master wide latitude in determining the reasonableness of both attorneys' fees and costs."). Applications for attorneys' fees must include contemporaneous and specific billing records that indicate the work performed and the number of hours spent on said work. See *Savin v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 85 Fed. Cl. 313, 316–18 (2008). Such applications, however, should not include hours that are "'excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary.'" *Saxton*, 3 F.3d at 1521 (quoting *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 434 (1983)).

Reasonable hourly rates are determined by looking at the "prevailing market rate" in the relevant community. See *Blum*, 465 U.S. at 895. The "prevailing market rate" is akin to the rate "in the community for similar services by lawyers of reasonably comparable skill, experience and reputation." *Id.* at 895, n.11. Petitioners bear the burden of providing adequate evidence to prove that the requested hourly rate is reasonable. *Id.*

**a. Hourly Rate**

The decision in *McCulloch* provides a framework for consideration of appropriate ranges for attorneys' fees based upon the experience of the practicing attorney. *McCulloch v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 09-293V, 2015 WL 5634323, at \*19 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Sept. 1, 2015), *motion for recons. denied*, 2015 WL 6181910 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Sept. 21, 2015). The Court has since updated the *McCulloch* rates, and the Attorneys' Forum Hourly Rate Fee Schedules can be accessed online.<sup>3</sup>

Petitioner requests the following hourly rates for the work of her counsel, Mr. Andrew Downing: \$385.00 per hour for work performed in 2010-2021, \$415.00 per hour for work performed in the earlier months of 2022, \$445.00 per hour for work performed in the later part of 2022<sup>4</sup>, and \$445.00 per hour for work performed in 2023. On behalf of Ms. Courtney Van Cott, Petitioner requests \$205.00 per hour for work performed in 2019, and \$275.00 per hour for work performed in 2020 and 2021. These rates are largely consistent with what Mr. Downing and Ms. Van Cott have previously been awarded for their Vaccine Program work, and the undersigned finds them to be reasonable herein. *See, e.g., Olschansky v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 17-1096V, 2020 WL 1027681 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Feb. 21, 2020). However, Mr. Downing's 2022 rate increase has consistently been rejected by this Court, and the undersigned shall likewise reimburse all of Mr. Downing's 2022 work at \$415.00 per hour. *See, e.g., Rossiter v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 20-1888V, 2023 WL 3778899, at \*2 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Jun. 2, 2023); *Switzer v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 18-1418V, 2023 WL 3580593, at \*2 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. May 22, 2023). The requested amount of \$445.00 per hour is a reasonable rate for Mr. Downing's work in 2023. Ultimately, the adjustment of Mr. Downing's 2022 rate results in a reduction of \$225.00.

**b. Reasonable Number of Hours**

Attorneys' fees are awarded for the "number of hours reasonably expended on the litigation." *Avera*, 515 F.3d at 1348. Counsel should not include in their fee requests hours that are "excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary." *Saxton*, 3 F.3d at 1521 (quoting *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 434 (1983)).

Upon review, the undersigned finds the overall hours billed to be reasonable. Counsel has provided sufficiently detailed descriptions for the tasks performed, and upon review, the undersigned does not find any of the billing entries to be unreasonable. Accordingly, Petitioner is entitled to final attorneys' fees in the amount of \$38,629.50.

**c. Attorney Costs**

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<sup>3</sup> The OSM Fee Schedules are available at: <http://www.cofc.uscourts.gov/node/2914>. The hourly rates contained within the schedules are updated from the decision in *McCulloch*, 2015 WL 5634323.

<sup>4</sup> Upon switching firms in July of 2022, Mr. Downing increased his hourly rate.

Like attorneys' fees, a request for reimbursement of attorneys' costs must be reasonable. *Perreira v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 27 Fed. Cl. 29, 34 (Fed. Cl. 1992). Petitioner requests a total of \$4,519.17 in attorneys' costs, comprised of acquiring medical records, postage, and work performed by a medical expert, Dr. James Wheeler. Petitioner has provided adequate documentation of all these expenses, and they appear reasonable in the undersigned's experience. Accordingly, Petitioner is awarded the full amount of costs sought.

## II. Conclusion

In accordance with the Vaccine Act, 42 U.S.C. §15(e) (2012), the undersigned has reviewed the billing records and costs in this case and finds that Petitioner's request for fees and costs, other than the reductions delineated above, is reasonable. Based on the above analysis, the undersigned finds that it is reasonable to compensate Petitioner and her counsel as follows:

Attorneys' Fees Requested	\$38,854.50
(Reduction to Fees)	- (\$225.00)
<b>Total Attorneys' Fees Awarded</b>	<b>\$38,629.50</b>
Attorneys' Costs Requested	\$4,519.17
(Reduction of Costs)	-
<b>Total Attorneys' Costs Awarded</b>	<b>\$4,519.17</b>
<b>Total Attorneys' Fees and Costs</b>	<b>\$43,148.67</b>

Accordingly, the undersigned awards a lump sum in the amount of \$43,148.67, representing reimbursement for Petitioner's attorneys' fees and costs, in the form of a check payable to Petitioner and Petitioner's counsel, Mr. Andrew Downing.

In the absence of a motion for review filed pursuant to RCFC Appendix B, the clerk of the court is directed to enter judgment herewith.<sup>5</sup>

**IT IS SO ORDERED.**

s/Herbrina D. Sanders  
Herbrina D. Sanders  
Special Master

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<sup>5</sup> Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), entry of judgment can be expedited by the parties' joint filing of notice renouncing the right to seek review.